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SUBJECT: FAMILY MEMBERS OF IMPRISONED DISSIDENTS SHARE THEIR STORIES

REF: A) HCMC 130 B) 08 HCMC 105

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: On February 27, family members of several imprisoned democracy activists from Bloc 8406, the People's Democratic Party, United Workers and Farmers Organization and Bach Dang Giang shared news with PolOff about their relatives' recent hunger strike as well as general conditions for political prisoners, which they find to be more restrictive than for the general prison population. While some family members fared better than others in getting prison guards to relax the rules, all family members said their relatives live "in a prison within a prison" with limited access to reading materials and media and stricter adherence to regulations for incoming food and personal items. Father Ly's sister and nephew also spoke about his internment at Ba Sao (aka Nam Ha) Prison in the northern province of Ha Nam. Family members said the prisoners were heartened to hear about the USG's ongoing interest in their cases and urged continued support for democracy and human rights in Vietnam. End summary.

#### STRICTER REGIME FOR POLITICAL PRISONERS

¶2. (SBU) Family members of some of Vietnam's most well-known political prisoners met with PolOff on February 27 to share news they received during recent visits, including the three day hunger strike staged by Bloc 8406 activists at the Z30A prison in Dong Nai province on February 19 to protest their lack of access to reading materials, media reports and outdoor exercise. Family members said the prisoners were only allowed to read one newspaper a week, Nhan Dan (People), the official newspaper of the Communist Party. Unlike their fellow non-political prisoners, they were not allowed to use the prison library, eat in the canteen or watch news reports on TV.

¶3. (SBU) Several family members also said that prison guards made them strictly adhere to the 5 kg limit on fresh food and household goods they brought to the prisoners during each visit, though some said they were able to bring in more by paying small bribes or building relationships with particular prison guards. The mother of People's Democratic Party (PDP) activist Nguyen Bac Truyen said she was able to bring in 19 kilos of food to her son on her last visit, but the amount "depended on the mood of the guards and the behavior of the prisoners." After the shy wife of a Bach Dang Giang (BDG) activist said she was also able to bring her husband over 5 kg of food on her last visit, the outspoken mother of Paltalk activist Truong Quoc Huy (Paltalk is the popular online chat room he used disseminate pro-democracy messages) jokingly quipped she would accompany the young woman next time so she could "charm the guards with her beauty."

¶4. (SBU) With regard to prison labor, family members said the situation had improved after ConGenOffs visited Dong Nai to assess the prison's labor programs in September 2008 (ref A) and

that the guards were "nicer" to the prisoners after learning about the Consulate's meetings with family members. While the physical health of the prisoners was generally good, family members worried about their relatives' mental and emotional states. Family members said guards would try every few months to persuade the prisoners to sign a written "confession" of their crimes, promising an early amnesty, but all prisoners refused to sign. They reported that one political prisoner named "Giang" was put into solitary confinement after refusing to sign (Note: Family members could not give PolOff the prisoner's full name or political affiliation to check against post's Persons of Concern list. End note.)

#### FATHER LY FASTS FOR THAI HA

15. (SBU) Father Ly's sister and nephew, who reside in neighboring Dong Nai province, said their last visit to Father Ly at Ba Sao prison in Nam Ha on January 12 found Father Ly in good health and spirits. (Note: Because of the long distance, they are only able to visit Father Ly every two to three months, while the relatives of the Dong Nai prisoners, who all reside in the Ho Chi Minh city area, visit monthly. End note) They noted that Father Ly fasts at lunchtime every day in order to pray for the Thai Ha parishioners in Hanoi. Father Ly also prays daily for the GVN to allow free speech, end "systematic abortion" and return private properties to citizens and religious organizations. While they have no issues bringing in food or supplies, Father Ly's sister said he is only allowed to read Phap Luat (The Law), the official paper of the Ministry of Justice and that the Bible given to him by the Archbishop of Hue in December 2008 had been confiscated by guards. The guards did allow him to keep the crucifix given by the Archbishop, however.

#### UPDATE ON HUYEN NGUYEN DAO

16. (SBU) The brother of PDP member Le Nguyen Sang said he'd met  
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with dissident Huyen Nguyen Dao on February 27, but the security presence around Dao's residence was still "tight" following his February 15 release from prison and he would not be able to meet with PolOff for some time (ref A).

#### COMMENT

17. (SBU) While most relatives were reluctant to discuss their own difficulties, preferring to focus on those of the political prisoners, some reported continued pressure from authorities at home. Several mentioned that they or their family members had been surveilled or approached by security police and were routinely summoned to their ward police station for "working sessions." All expected to be called in again after their meeting with PolOff. The mutual support and camaraderie exhibited by the family members during the meeting was heartening to see--all routinely communicated with each other in advance of prison visits and carried news, food and other necessities to the relatives of other prisoners when they could. In spite of the additional scrutiny they expected to receive from authorities after their meeting at the Consulate, all were grateful for the USG's attention to their family members' cases and urged the USG to continue to raise their cases with US and GVN officials whenever possible. End comment.

18. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Hanoi.  
BENNETT